DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 336 746 CS 213 009

AUTHOR Hess, Mary Lou
TITLE Making Meaning Together through Literature Circles.
PUB DATE 91
NOTE 14p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Teaching Guides (For Teacher) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Cooperative Learning; Discussion (Teaching Technique); Grade 5; Grouping (Instructional Purposes); Intermediate Grades; Learner Controlled Instruction; *Reading Instruction; Reading Programs; Special Needs Students; *Teacher Role; Teacher Student Relationship
IDENTIFIERS *Literature Based Reading Programs

ABSTRACT

A special needs teacher and a fifth-grade teacher developed a literature-based reading program based on the principle that no child, particularly the unskilled, should be excluded from a literature group. The program places a high value on talk and uses heterogeneous grouping of students. Students in the class choose the novels they wish to read and the teachers relate intriguing details of the plots and summarize the beginning of the novels. Students are formed into groups of six to eight according to the novels they choose and are responsible for discussion. Discussion begins each day with a summary provided by one of the students. After discussion, students write entries in their reading logs. While one group discusses, other groups listen to tape recordings of portions of the novel or of their own discussions for (self-evaluation), engage in independent reading, or work on illustrations of a scene from the novel. The teacher's role is to support the functioning of the group, not to dominate or dictate. The most successful discussions are ones in which teachers and students work collaboratively to make meaning. Able readers model reading strategies for less able readers, who contribute astute observations about plot. Literature circles provide students with an opportunity to use talk to question, to respond, and to reflect: the teachers assist the students as they share their reading, compare their interpretations, and learn from each other. (A literature circle discussion checklist is enclosed; 14 references and a list of 10 children's books are attached.) (RS)

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Making Meaning Together through Literature Circles

by Mary Lou Hess

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Making Meaning Together through Literature Circles

by Mary Lou Hess

I was sitting at a large rectangular table with eight students, ages ten to twelve. Some were regular students, and some had special needs. We each had a copy of The Eighteenth Emergency by Betsy Byars. Yellow Post-its stuck out from the pages of each copy, reading logs lay open at personal goal sheets.

It was a large double classroom area. The folding door that used to separate the special needs students from the regular students had been retracted, and two teachers' desks sat in the middle. Twenty-five regular grade five students, eight special needs students, an educational assistant, a special needs teacher and myself, a grade five teacher, shared this space.

Right now we were having literature circles. Eight students and I were engaged in a lively discussion of their common novel. A tape recorder picked up every word. Another group of eight students in the same area was listening to a tape recording of their discussion from the previous day. They assessed their participation as they kept a tally in their notebooks of their responses under the headings: agree, disagree, other.

In the other half of this large area, my colleague, Cheryl Rice, was also engaged in a discussion of a novel with a small group of students. After the discussion, the students remained in their group to write a response in their reading logs. There were two more reading groups in this half of the room. One group wore headphones and was listening to a section of their book on tape. The other group had split up into pairs reading silently together on the floor, taking turns reading out loud, or painting at the easels. The assistant conferred with the students at the easels about the scene they planned to illustrate from the novel.

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Rationale

The Special Needs teacher, Cheryl Rice, and I developed a literature-based reading program based on several principles. We strongly believed that

no child, particularly the unskilled, should be excluded from a literature group. Frank Smith (1988) calls this a "literacy club" where "members ... are people who read..., even the beginners, and the fact that one is not very competent yet is no reason for exclusion or ridicule." (p. 11) As teachers we felt a responsibility to organize a program that "facilitated and promoted the admission of [all] children into the literacy club." (Smith 1988, p. 11) We organized groups which were heterogeneous in reading ability because we were committed to providing an opportunity for special needs students to participate in rich discussion of good quality literature with more able peers. We were dismayed with the results of the NAEP report, **Learning to Read in Our Nation's Schools: Instruction and Achievement in 1988 at Grades 4, 8, and 12**, which found that "Instruction for most fourth-grade students (was) based on a single basal reader ... [and] 79 percent of the students (were) assigned to ability-based reading groups" (Reading Today,1990).

Cheryl and I also placed a high value on talk. We agreed with James Britton's thoughts about a good conversation: "The participants profit from their own talking ... and from the interaction ... the enabling effect of each upon the others" (1972, p. 239). We believed that through talk, students clarify their own understanding and incorporate new learning into existing mental frameworks (Barnes & Todd, 1977; Strickland et al, 1989). They should be given time to think out loud about their reading in order to test their compositions against those of others and learn from others (Hansen, 1987). For these reasons, we provided the students with many opportunities to talk.

Cheryl and I wanted to develop independent readers, students who would develop their own meaning from the text. We did not want the discussion to be an occasion for guessing what the teacher thought was important in the novel. We encouraged the students to generate their own questions while reading because this increases reading comprehension (Cohen, 1983; Wong, 1985). They wrote their questions on Post-its (4cm x 5cm) and stuck them on the

appropriate pages. We also taught the students to monitor the state of their reading comprehension by marking with Post-its parts that were confusing or that they didn't understand. This would develop the metacognitive skills of self-monitoring and predicting, the lack of which causes poor reading comprehension in learning disabled students (Wong & Jones, 1982). The Post-its also served as flags which the students learned to use to create a kind of index that a more experienced reader employs automatically. They used them to indicate "sections or phrases that seemed interesting or puzzling or significant, sections or phrases that they could turn to later when they needed to work up an account of what they'd read" (Bartholomae & Petrosky 1986, p.18). The comments on the Post-its became the basis of our discussions and allowed the students to take ownership of the reading discussions.

Organization

We started our literature program by giving every child in the class the opportunity to choose the novel that he or she wanted to read. Cheryl and I carefully researched and selected novels based on literary value and the students' interests and reading abilities. We scrounged multiple copies of books from the school library, the public library, and the district's language center. We spent most of our classroom budget on books. At first, the novels were humorous and easy to understand: Mr. Popper's Penguins, Ramona the Pest, Jacob Two-Two and the Hooded Fang. For the beginning readers and the students who had only been reading and speaking English since September, we offered Flat Stanley and The Shrinking of Treehorn. Later on we read more demanding books like The Eighteenth Emergency, The Iron Man, and Sarah, Plain and Tall. We presented five or six titles at a time from which the students could choose.

In order to help students with their choices, Cheryl and I promoted the books by relating intriguing details of the plot. We also summarized the events in the beginning of the book so that when students began reading the

first chapter, it would go quickly because they already knew a bit about the characters, setting and plot (Gilles, 1989). Then we gave students time to browse through the books before they decided their first and second choices. I fully expected the special needs students to choose the easier books, but such was not the case. If a book interested them, they chose it even though it was too difficult for them to read on their own.

The students wrote their selections on slips of paper, and we arranged them in groups of six to eight, respecting their choices. One challenge for us as teachers was to make this a successful reading experience for the less capable students. They were highly motivated to read challenging books but they needed support. The special needs teacher audiotaped several chapters of the book, and because I had encouraged my regular students to use the listening center, the special needs students felt no stigma in taking advantage of this aid. During our daily, twenty-minute, independent reading time, one of the two teachers or the assistant would sometimes read to students who were becoming weary of the reading tasks before them. Sandra, one of the learning disabled students, appreciated this: "Sometimes if the book is hard and there's a teacher in the group, the teacher will read those parts that we don't understand." During the independent reading period, these students also received help from their more able peers. Since each reading group sat together to facilitate collaboration, less capable readers could ask a peer to read a difficult section to them when they got stuck.

In addition to choosing their own books, the students were responsible for the discussion. At our first meeting, in which they received their novel, I also gave them a pad of Post-its. Together we brainstormed a list of the kinds of things they could flag as they read: questions, predictions, interesting details, parts where they had a strong feeling, parts they liked, sections that reminded them of personal experiences, difficult words, and confusing paragraphs.

We started the discussion each day by listening to a student who had volunteered the previous day to review briefly, the events of the chapter or chapters under discussion. This simple routine served two purposes. It refreshed everyone's memory, particularly those, like myself, who had read ahead or were reading other books too, and it got the discussion started quickly. Students then took the initiative to keep the conversation going by referring to their Post-its and responding to each other.

At the end of each discussion, the students assessed their own work on a check list (Figure 1). I found this checklist a quick way to make children accountable for their contributions and time. It was like paying dues: these were the minimum requirements for membership in the club. Students reflected out loud about the discussion as they filled in their checklists, and this quick assessment usually acted as an affirmation of each member's contribution. Like a true club, the group also decided at the end of each discussion how far they would read for the next meeting and who would retell the next day. They were expected to read during the rest of the reading period, at our daily independent reading time in the afternoon, and at home.

The students were involved in evaluating themselves at the end of each novel study as well. They assessed their progress towards a personal goal they had previously set by conferring with me and by writing in their reading logs. Then they set a new goal for the next novel study which they wrote in the blank space on the checklist. (See Figure 1.) For example, Sandra's personal goal when studying Did You Carry the Flag Today, Charley? was "To write more questions on the stickums." At the end of that study, she recognized that she had not achieved her goal and set the same goal for her study of The Eighteenth Emergency. She wrote, "Have lots of questions for my book." Other students' personal goals were: Make guesses about what will happen; When someone says something, I have to agree, disagree or ask a question; Make connections with my life or other books; Give more proof when I

am talking; Write a page in my reading log.

(Insert figure 1.)

The Teacher's Supporting Role

Initially, my role in the literature circles was to demonstrate for the students ways to respond to each other. Because they were so used to having the teacher decide who would speak and when, they had difficulty jumping into the conversation and keeping it going. Cheryl and I had purposely kept the groups small, with a maximum of eight copies of each book, so that there could be a free-flowing discussion. We expected students to contribute voluntarily, with no hand raising. We all had difficulty with our new roles at first. I limited my responses to questions, to draw students into the conversation: Do you feel the same? What do you think? Why? We taught the students to respond to each other by agreeing, disagreeing, asking a question, or finding another example. I audiotaped many of the discussions because I wanted to take a second look at what the students talked about and my role in the discussion. Much to my surprise the students also wanted to listen to the tapes in order to assess their participation in the group. Felicia, for example, realized that she needed "to tell more in discussion, and give proof from the story."

I had encouraged the students to make personal connections with the text. I was moved by Annie Dillard who wrote: "Why are we reading if not in hope that the writer will magnify and dramatize our days?" (1989, p.73). Now I was feeling uncomfortable with, what seemed to me, the amount of time some students spent sharing strongly personal anecdotes. I felt that the purpose of the discussion was to come to a deeper understanding of the text: the themes, the motives of characters, the writer's style. Some of the students' anecdotes seemed to wander too far from the text. Thomas Newkirk's presentation at a local reading conference (1991) taught me to value these very personal stories. I came to realize that "our children's stories are as

important as those of literature" (Calkins 1991, p.23). Their personal anecdotes created social energy and a feeling of good will. When one group discussed the weird names in The Search for Delicious, Anthea shared a personal experience from visiting relatives in the Caribbean: " All these names remind me of when I went to St.Vincent and I had all these cousins, and everywhere I went there were my cousins and then I had to remember all those names. They just had to remember my name." At the same discussion, the students thought it was odd that the towns in The Search had no names but were numbered: first town, second town. Edison's comment brought meaning to the text: "in the States, they have them named by number too, like if you go to New York, the streets are numbered." Because of these personal stories, everyone's understanding of the novel was increased and enriched.

As I listened to the audiotapes, I noticed that when I let the personal anecdotes run their course, the discussion eventually came back to the text. I consoled myself that my time to be a leader was during the daily mini-lesson before the students broke up into their discussion groups. I used this opportunity to expose the students to the writer's craft, elements of fiction, strategies for effective reading and tips for responding more effectively during discussion.

The most successful discussions were ones in which we worked collaboratively to make meaning. The discussions became an occasion for two cultures to connect - the adult's and the students' cultures (Newkirk, 1991). I realized that my role was to clue into the students' world by listening carefully to their concerns, and to extend or help them clarify their thinking. Their concerns were many: making predictions about the plot, discussing the meaning of words, talking about the writer's craft, sharing reading strategies, making connections to other books and authors or to personal experiences.

The following excerpt, from a discussion of The Search, illustrates my

supportive role in the discussion. Jon starts by making a comparison with a Roald Dahl book. Just as the students are ready to dismiss these passages of verse, Jon makes a comment about singing the verses that makes me realize he is unconsciously hinting at a reading strategy for appreciating poetry. Notice how the students quickly pick up on the strategy of reading out loud. I verbalize the strategy for the students in hopes that they will use it when they encounter poetry again.

Jon: And also on 55 ... the minstrel played something. (Jon is referring to the words to the song, written in italics in verse form.) It reminds me of James and the Giant Peach ... just the way it's kind of like a rhyme ... it's not really like a song.
Ted: I thought it was weird.
Jason: I skipped it. I didn't want to read this. It's not really important. It's just words.
Edison: It's boring.
Jon: They're just nonsense songs. But if you sing them, they're more interesting.
Teacher: Sing? How did you sing here?
Jon: Well, now I'm just singing it to myself and it's fun.
(Ted starts reading the poem out loud. Several students join in. Jon joins in, adding a rhythm to it. I continue Jon's beat and keep reading the verse while the rest listen.)
Jon: I like it. It's different... If you read it out.
Teacher: If you say it out loud?
Edison: It's easier. Yeah.
Teacher: I think that's true for poetry. You have to say it. It's the sound of the words. (I read). "Where, whither, whence when the wind cries Go'".
Edison: This is a tongue twister.

At the next day's discussion, the students read several more sections of verse out loud and discussed their significance to the plot. No longer did they dismiss these passages as boring or nonsensical. I also changed my reading of these verses as a result of our discussion. Previously, I had felt, like Jason, that they contained no important information and had skipped over them. Now I, also, was reading them and looking for hidden meaning. I was excited by the fact that learning had become a truly collaborative experience between my students and me.

On other occasions, I noticed that the more able readers had made astute predictions about the plot. I purposely challenged them to prove their predictions from the text in order to increase the less able readers'

comprehension. In the following excerpt, Jon and Jason explain, with my prompting, the basis for their prediction. Their explanation should help Edison and Ted, both special needs students, to be more conscious of clues given by the author regarding Hemlock as they continue to read The Search.

Jon: I think Hemlock wants to overthrow the kingdo...
Jason: Yeah, overthrow the king.
Teacher: What makes you think that?
Jon: He's really mean and he's asking the woldweller how to get power.
Jason: Because he's asking about war and how can you get power. So I think he wants to take over.
Teacher: Edison and Ted, do you agree with Jon and Jason? Did you get any suspicions?
Edison: Well. (Silence)

Then Jon emphasized the author's intentions by breaking the silence and saying,"Well there's still lots of pages in the book where the author can show him (Hemlock) wanting to take over." Discussions like these, over time, should help Edison and Ted improve their skill in making predictions as they read.

Sometimes the conversation focussed on defining difficult words. I would assist the less able readers by challenging the more able ones to explain themselves clearly. The following example shows that all readers benefitted: Jon, the more able reader, had an opportunity to use language to elaborate on the meaning of a word; Ted increased his vocabulary.

Ted: On page 65, the cows are chewing something. I don't know what that means.
Teacher: "The cows are chewing calmly." Is that what you don't get?
Ted: Yeah, what is calmly?
Jon: They're just standing around eating ... chewing grass calmly.
Teacher: What does that mean?
Jon: They're eating it slowly, they're not gulping it all down and making a mess of everything. They're not jumping around and stuff.

The developing readers often looked to the more able members of the literature circle to answer their questions about confusing sections in the text. Sandra, one of the special needs students, recognized that this increased her comprehension: "When I get to ask a question, and the group answers it, I get what the book's about." Even the most capable students benefitted from discussions of the plot: "Sometimes I think of something when I read. Then someone else says something in discussion and it makes more sense

and I understand differently." They all appreciated that there can be more than one interpretation of the book: "When there are two opinions in the group, maybe each one is right."

Final Thoughts

The literature circles provided the students an opportunity to use talk to question, to respond, and to reflect. The adults' presence at the discussions created an atmosphere in which the students talked about their reading strategies, the characters' intentions, the writer's craft and the meaning of the text. We assisted the students as they shared their reading, compared their interpretations, and learned from each other. The lively discussions motivated the reluctant readers to spend more time reading. I enjoyed the challenge of assessing the students' talk and contributing comments which would enhance, clarify and extend their thinking. My study of the discussions showed me that my comments often helped the students engage in insightful, informative discussion. My decision to take a supportive role rather than a dominating one led me to appreciate more fully my students' abilities; it allowed them to become interdependent members of a community of readers.

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Figure 1

Literature Circle Discussion

Student Name: _____

Book Title: _____

Author: _____

Date					
I read the required pages.					
I listened to other people's ideas.					
I made connections.					
I gave my own ideas.					
I wrote in my Log.					